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McKinley Smoot
Utah State University

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MCKINLEY SMOOT graduated from Utah State University in 2014 with a bachelor's degree in Religious Studies. McKinley was raised on a cattle ranch on steppes of the Uinta Mountains, and is currently working in the real estate industry. He still pursues his interest in the academic study of religion and culture

McKinley Smoot

HELEN SCHUCMAN AND *A COURSE IN MIRACLES*: PERSONAL REVELATION TO SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

Since its initial publication in 1976, *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM) has sold over two million copies in 18 languages. Its vast circulation can be largely accredited to grassroots efforts.¹ This article examines the early development of this key “New Age” text and its significance in modern American spirituality and religion.

While the published *ACIM* was polished and made accessible for a central readership, it was initially a personal revelation to Helen Schucman and a small inner circle. *ACIM* was channeled in 1965 through Schucman who was, at the time, a research psychologist at Columbia University. She recorded in shorthand an “inner voice”² that she identified as the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Her original notes were later typed by Schuman’s department head Dr. William “Bill” Thetford. Then, in 1973, Schucman, Thetford, and an associate named

¹ D. Patrick Miller, *Understanding A Course in Miracles: The History, Message, and Legacy of a Spiritual Path for Today*. EBook, Potter/TenSpeed/Harmony November 23, 2011.

² D. Patrick Miller, *The Complete Story of The Course: The History, The People and the Controversies Behind A Course in Miracles* (Berkeley: Fearless Books, 1997), 1-6.

Kenneth Wapnick edited the manuscripts into the three sections of ACIM—the *Text*, *Workbook for Students*, and the *Manual for Teachers*.

HELEN SCHUCMAN AND BILL THETFORD:

UNLIKELY AND UNWILLING SCRIBES

Schucman and Thetford were enmeshed in the cut-throat and competitive world of midcentury psychology. Schucman was employed under Thetford, who was the head of the Psychology Department at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. They were also consultants to Cornell University Medical Center. Each week, they scheduled hour-long meetings in which [missing subject] recalled that tension between her and Thetford were high. In one of these meetings, Thetford conveyed to Schucman the need for change. Helen recalled this event in her autobiography:

[Bill] had something on his mind, but he seemed to be quite embarrassed and found it hard to talk about. In fact, he tried unsuccessfully several times to begin. Finally he took a deep breath, grew slightly red-faced, and delivered a speech. It was hard for him, he told me later, because the words sounded trite and sentimental even as he said them. Nor was he anticipating a particularly favorable response from me. Nevertheless, he said what he felt he had to say. He had been thinking things over and had concluded we were using the wrong approach. “*There must,*” he said, “*be another way.*” Our attitudes had become so negative that we could not work anything out. He had therefore decided to try to look at things differently.³

ACIM becomes a major focus in Schucman and Thetford’s work following this quarrel. This brought about a considerable change in their professional relationship.

The making of *A Course in Miracles* and the events surrounding its development were well documented and reveal many fascinating

³Kenneth Wapnick, *Absence from Felicity: The Story of Helen Schucman and Her Scribing of A Course in Miracles*, Roscoe (New York: Foundation for “A Course in Miracles,” 1991), 93.

insights about the personality and struggles of the book's creator, Helen Schucman. In her autobiography she described being raised in an affluent non-practicing Jewish and Lutheran home. She had little emotional attachment to her parents or their views on religion.⁴ It seems Helen Schucman had a tumultuous relationship with religion. She had a distaste for it, but could never dismiss it entirely. This was complicated by the visions and mystical experiences that she purported to have in both her adolescence and adulthood. She attempted to explain away these experiences by drawing on logic and psychology during her undergraduate and graduate training.⁵ She became an excellent and shrewd member of the academic community. According to Kenneth Wapnick, who was an influential member of the inner circle and who was well acquainted with Helen during and after the period that she channeled "the Voice," Helen was often angry and confused about the messages she received. What she relayed from "the Voice" was a non-dualistic worldview. Although the language of *ACIM* was highly Christian, it also forsook duality and with that, essential aspects of Christian doctrine, ideology, and practice. Concept such as good and evil, God and the Devil, sin and righteousness are examples of duality in traditional Christianity.⁶ *ACIM* attempts to correct traditional Christian duality, referring to such concepts as "errors in perception" that have been instilled in humanity through inculturation. In Chapter 3 of the *Text of ACIM*, it explains how perception itself is a "misuse of mind."

Consciousness, the level of perception, was the first split introduced into the mind after the separation [from the Divine], making the mind a perceiver rather than a creator. Consciousness is correctly identified as the domain of the ego. The ego is a wrong-minded attempt to perceive yourself as you wish to be, rather than as you

⁴ D. Patrick Miller, *The Complete Story of the Course*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.* Pages 34-38.

⁶ For an excellent textual comparison that highlights the differences in Christian Theology and the theology of *ACIM* please refer to Dean C. Halverson's compilation on page 154 and 155 of D. Patrick Miller's *The Complete Story of The Course*.

are. Yet you can know yourself only as you are, because that is all you can be sure of. Everything else *is* open to question.⁷

Here, *ACIM*, in a somewhat psychological vernacular, purports that our conscious perception is the cause of our split with God. It is this split that is the cause of all human suffering.⁸

Later, many *ACIM* teachers and followers would extend this teaching to Schuman's process of inner dictation, which occurred over a seven-year period and resulted in *ACIM*. The process was lengthy, and her dictations underwent extensive editing with the message initially tailored to Schucman, possibly extending to Bill Thetford, and later revised for public consumption.

Helen Schucman was a prophet who introduced a unique worldview. In her dictations, however, she deviated from many other prophets of New Religious Movements (NRM). Len Oake, in his comprehensive psychological survey entitled *Prophetic Charisma*, writes "Without ever appearing frenetic, prophets show enormous *energy* for life and the goals they set. Most need only a few hours of sleep each night. Some work tirelessly for the welfare of others, perhaps even dying from exhaustion... They are not beset by the fears, shame, and guilt that limit others."⁹ This was not necessarily true of Helen Schucman, who struggled against the weight of her prophetic mantle.

At times, Schucman appears harrowed by her own imperfections. In lesson 93 she channeled:

You think you are the home of evil, darkness and sin. You think if anyone could see the truth about you he would be repelled, recoiling from you as if from a poisonous snake. You think if what is true about you were revealed to you, you would be struck with horror so

⁷ *ACIM*, T-3.IV.4

⁸ For more on the ideology/cosmology of *ACIM* and how humanity arrived into the ego state see T-27.VIII.

⁹ Len Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 12.

intense that you would rush to death by your own hand, living on after seeing this being impossible.¹⁰

ACIM reflected Schucman's personal journey with God, including her struggle to discard the ego and accept God's will. Continuing in lesson 93 she wrote:

Today we question this, not from the point of view of what you think, but from a very different reference point, from which such idle thoughts are meaningless. These thoughts are not according to God's Will. These weird beliefs He does not share with you. This is enough to prove that they are wrong, but you do not perceive that this is so.¹¹

Despite the message that Schucman received, the prophetic figure increasingly isolated herself from society, eventually, suffering emotional instability when the "Voice" fell silent. Her health continued to decline until her death in 1981 due to advanced pancreatic cancer.¹²

THE DIFFERENT TONES OF "THE VOICE"

In the thick of her initial experiences with "the Voice," Schucman turned to Thetford for relief. He encouraged her to record her thoughts on paper. One of the first things she wrote: "This is a course in miracles, please take notes."¹³ Historian Doug Thompson compiled Schucman's extensive notes and the earliest versions of the texts, known today as the *Urtext Manuscript*. They reflect an intimate relationship between "the Voice" and Helen and Bill, although personal nuances were later removed. "The Voice" addressed issues such as sex, including Bill Thetford's homosexuality and, although

¹⁰ *A Course in Miracles*, (Mill Valley, California: Foundation For Inner Peace, 1996) W-p1.93.1

¹¹ *Ibid.* W-p1.93.3

¹² Kenneth Wapnick, *Absence from Felicity*, 493-499.

¹³ Doug Thompson, *The Shorthand Notes Manuscripts of Helen Schucman*, (compiled October 7th, 2009), 1. http://www.jcim.net/Images/Notes_Transcript.pdf Accessed February 15th, 2015.

omitted from the final version, the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, clairvoyant Edgar Cayce and religious leader Mary Baker Eddy.

Sacred texts have been heavily edited throughout time. This is often done to make the content of a revelation more understandable and accessible to individuals beyond those directly involved in the supernatural. As the texts are altered, the original content and context—how the event was originally perceived—is obscured by its revelators. The *Shorthand Notes*, the original dictation included the authoritative voice of Jesus of Nazareth. He addressed Schucman and Thetford's spiritual questions and personal concerns. In addition, the shorthand notes contained the recording of highly symbolic dreams that tend to lack the same sense of authority or wisdom that the modern *ACIM* contains. For example, the polished version of *ACIM* published in 1976 contained a poetic style and authoritative voice, such as found on page 138 of Chapter 8 entitled "The Journey Back:"

Knowledge is not the motivation for learning this course. Peace is. This is the prerequisite for knowledge only because those who are in conflict are not peaceful, and peace is the condition of knowledge because it is the condition of the Kingdom. Knowledge can be restored only when you meet its conditions. This not a bargain made by God, Who makes no bargains. It is merely the result of your misuse of His laws on behalf of an imaginary will that is not His. Knowledge is His Will. If you are opposing His Will, how can you have knowledge? I have told you what knowledge offers you, but perhaps you do not yet regard this as wholly desirable. If you did you would not be so ready to throw it away when the ego asks for your allegiance.¹⁴

This section described the state of being one must be in in order to gain knowledge and attain peace. If a person is unwilling to abandon conflict, then they cannot obtain inner peace. A person may be attached to that conflict and, in that way, ego becomes their desire. It is this tone of authority and mystical wisdom that dominates the

¹⁴ *ACIM*, T.8.I.1

1976 published version of *A Course in Miracles*, the 1,249-page version that devotees use and know.

There is another, far more personal tone “the Voice” takes when questioned by Schucman or Thetford. The following example comes in response to Thetford’s concern with a section found in Chapter 1, “Principles of Miracles.”¹⁵ The initial language was significantly altered in the 1976 version. In the *Urtext*, page 10 (T 1 B 18 & 18b), stated:

A miracle is a service. It is the maximal service that one soul can render to another. It is a way of loving your neighbor as yourself. The doer recognizes his own and his neighbor’s inestimable value simultaneously. (This is why no areas of hatred can be retained. If you retain them, your own value is no longer inestimable because you are evaluating it as X or infinity minus that amount. This is meaningless mathematically, which uses the term ‘inestimable’ only in the very literal sense. Pun intended especially for B[Bill], (who originally did not get it.) Intended as a special sign of love.)¹⁶

The lines contained in parenthesis were omitted from the published version in 1976 (T1 18b), and the line not contained in parenthesis (T1 B18) was included with some minor changes in the published version. The voice defines miracles not necessarily as supernatural event, but as expressions of love between human beings. These expressions of love, according to *ACIM* ideology, do not necessarily refer to acts of service, but as conceptualizing and accepting others as they “truly are.”¹⁷ The following paragraph is found in the *Shorthand Notes*, as well as in the *Urtext*, but was omitted from the published version. Speaking to Thetford, “the Voice” exclaimed:

¹⁵ *ACIM*, T.1.I.18

¹⁶ Doug Thompson, *A Course in Miracles: Urtext Manuscripts, Complete Seven Volume Combined Edition*, (Jaffrey, NH: Miracles in Action Press, 2009), T1 B 18 & 18b (page 10).

¹⁷ For a more comprehensive understanding of *ACIM*’s view on miracles read pages 3-6 of the *Text* in *A Course in Miracles*.

I threw that in especially for Bill, because he does need special signs of love. He doesn't really but he does think so. Now tell him that homo sex is sinful only to the extent it is based on the principle of exclusion. Everybody should love everybody. It is wrong to deny the beauty of some souls because of body-structures of which you are afraid. This is essentially an unhealthy attempt to limit fear but fear cannot be limited, just as love cannot have limits. Heterosexual attitudes can be similarly distracted but do contain a more natural potential. Sex relations are intended for children. You and Bill have misunderstood sex, because you both recognize it as a way of establishing human contact for yourselves. This has led you to body-image problems. Children are miracles in their own right. They already have the gift of life and their parents provide them with the opportunity to express it. Nothing physical, mental or spiritual should be used selfishly. The pleasure from using anything should be in utilizing it for God's will. You should live so that God is free to arrange temporary human constellations as He sees fit. Do not interpret this in terms of guilt. Many children which are already here need spiritual parents. The poor are always with us, and many which are born have not been reborn. Human birth, maturation, and development is a microcosmic representation of a much larger process of Creation and development of abilities. It is subject to error as long as the real purpose of free will is misunderstood and misdirected. The real function of parents is to be wiser than the children in this respect and to teach them accordingly ((This upsets me)).¹⁸

On one hand, "the Voice" seems to promote polyamory, but on the other, confine sexual relationships to sole the purpose of procreation. However, in interpreting the passage, understanding the role of non-duality in ACIM clarifies the discrepancy. For example, in a marriage relationship it is likely that most people love (in the sense of companionship, respect, and appreciation) their spouse more than they would love a cashier at a grocery store. These "special relationships" have varying degrees of "special love" and are created

¹⁸ Doug Thompson, *Urtext Manuscripts*, Footnote 13 on page 10.

by humans to separate ourselves from God and ultimately each other. According to ACIM, this type of exclusion is a disadvantage to mankind.¹⁹ Beyond content, the differentiation between this, the personalized tone, of “the Voice” and the more sanitized tone found in the published version is fascinating.

The third and final distinction of “the Voice’s” tone is found in Schucman’s personal dreams. Her dreams tended to be about people she knew, and while including vivid imagery and detail, were extremely vague and cryptic.²⁰ These experiences were common for Schucman, beginning in her early childhood. She was subject to numerous visionary experiences before she began dictating *ACIM*. These dreams were so vivid that she felt compelled to record them.²¹

Schucman’s extensive documentation of her personal experiences reveal that “the Voice” had varying tones. Whether authoritative, in terms of the polished publication, personalized, in terms of the Urtext, or cryptic, in terms of Schucman’s recorded personal dreams, they shed light on her revelatory process and the construction of *ACIM*. It also shows the human component of it all and the role and influence of Schucman and Thetford’s personal experiences.

A COURSE IN MIRACLES: CLAIMS AND RELATIONS TO OTHER RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS

A Course in Miracles makes no demand on its readership to believe. The only requirement is an orthopraxic dedication. Throughout *ACIM*’s *Text* and *Workbook* are metaphysical precepts,

¹⁹ For a fascinating and more comprehensive look on *ACIM*’s idea of “special relationships” and “special love” please refer to pages 357-361 of the *Text* in *A Course in Miracles*.

²⁰ If the reader has interest what these dreams actually say the transcription of the available *Shorthand Notes* is available at the website http://www.jcim.net/Images/Notes_Transcript.pdf. This website was accessed on March 29th, 2015. Intermixed Pages between 5-58.

²¹ For Helen’s transcribed dreams and visions see pages 53-82 of *Absence of Felicity*.

but there is no requisite of belief to practice its lessons or apply its teachings. While others would utilize *ACIM* in developing their own organizations, as discussed below, Schucman and her initial followers never established an official church. Instead, *ACIM* promoted individual practice, a unique aspect of the text. Another fascinating dimension to *ACIM* was its unorthodox representation of the Jesus of Nazareth.

It is difficult to reconcile *ACIM* has with Christianity. The *Text* and *The Workbook of A Course in Miracles* contain Christian vernacular. However, where Protestants, who make up 51% of Christians in the United States, emphasize belief, *ACIM* is a practice-based ideology and does not necessitate belief.²² The following is an example of orthopraxy in *ACIM*:

Remember only this; you need not believe the ideas, you need not accept them, and you need not even welcome them. Some of them you may actively resist. None of this will matter, or decrease their efficacy. But do not allow yourself to make exceptions in applying the ideas the workbook contains, and whatever your reactions to the ideas may be use, use them. Nothing more than that is required.²³

Statements such as theses caused *ACIM* to thrive uniquely among New Age and new American religious movements. No religious institutions formed around the book and a related hierarchy was never established. But despite this, the creation and dissemination of *ACIM* has been wrought with religious symbolism and ritual. Scholars Merlin Brinkerhoff and Jeffrey Jacob observed:

Those who subscribe to the principles explicated in *A Course in Miracles* often engage in sacred religious behavior such as faith healing, prayer and meditation, spiritual experiences that rival and perhaps even surpass the sacred nature of much formal religious observance... Quasi-religious movements like *A Course in Miracles* survive and thrive with minimum of organizational infrastructure,

²² "PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project: Religious Landscape Survey." Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#>

²³ *ACIM*: W-p1.Intro.Paragraph 9.

while naturally, a formal religion such as Catholicism would lose its identity without a dense organizational structure.²⁴

Often *ACIM* has presented non-traditional representations of Jesus. For example, Schucman recorded the following, “Let me be to you the symbol of the end of guilt, and look upon your brother as you would look on me. Forgive me all the sins you think the Son of God committed. And the light of your forgiveness he will remember who he is, and forget what never was.”²⁵ This divergence from traditional Christianity has appealed to largely to individuals jaded by religion.

The Foundation for Inner Peace was the official publishing organization of *ACIM*, and consisted of the initial cast of players who brought *ACIM* to life such as Helen Schucman, Bill Thetford, Kenneth Wapnick, and Judy Skutch. Even today, the remaining organization continues to print, translate, and disseminate Schucman’s dictations for an international audience. While none of the original “inner circle” are alive today, there are numerous online organizations that use, even sacralize, *A Course in Miracles*. Others gather physically and have incorporated the manuscript into their spiritual retreats, family lives, and even in “monasteries” throughout the world. The way that these individuals and groups have adopted *ACIM* demonstrate how the text has evolved from its inception in 1965—from personal revelation into a universal text.

The Living Miracles Centers headed by David Hoffmeister has been quite prolific in its distribution of online materials and YouTube videos that discuss and promote *ACIM*. Living Miracles Centers consists of two facilities reside in rural Utah, and another retreat center in Mexico.²⁶ These groups are facilitated by full time volunteers known as Messengers of Peace who devote their lives to the teachings

²⁴ Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Jeffrey C. Jacob, “Mindfulness and Quasi-Religious Meaning Systems: An Empirical Exploration within the Context of Ecological Sustainability and Deep Ecology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 1999), pp. 524-542. Accessed April 5, 2015.

²⁵ *ACIM*: T-19.IV.B.6.

²⁶ Detailed information about Living Miracles Centers and their locations can be found at <https://livingmiraclescenter.org/centers.html>.

of *ACIM*. Many participants have been heavily influenced by the New Age movement and authors such as Wayne Dyer, Eckhart Tolle, and Marianne Williamson. In an interview that I conducted with Suzanne Sullivan, a Messenger of Peace of the Living Miracles Centers, and dedicated practitioner, she explained, "I would try to make it work in the world. I would try to do everything that I thought I was supposed to do as a person in the world. And yet there was always this feeling of being split, and that not quite working out... I think that is a very common thing with the human condition. We think we got it and then we don't, and we go after something else, then it falls." Sullivan described her introduction into the movement, "I joined with my sister and a girlfriend and we met once a week to try to see if we could start to understand...conceptually, a little bit more of what The Course was saying. We did that for a year. We read the book together, and believe me it was very helpful. We didn't know what we were doing, but we were there in prayer saying, 'okay, show us what this means.' And then it was like learning a language."²⁷ Overtime the text radically changed her life. Sullivan's story is not unlikely many others New Age seekers who have found purpose in *ACIM*.

According to Sullivan the primary role of *ACIM* in the Living Miracles Centers is community and application.

The Course has brought us all together. Its kind of the foundation of the awakening for us, but at a certain point... it says you lay it all down, and then you make a living demonstration. And I think that's where Living Miracles comes from... I mean we never sit around and study *A Course in Miracles* here, although there are many copies on the shelf. This is where you come and you literally apply the principles of *A Course in Miracle*. And so when you come here its like coming inside the book and living it.

In other words, The Living Miracles Center has made the orthopraxical nature of *ACIM* their foundational tenet.

²⁷ Interview with Suzanne Sullivan with the author, conducted March 13th, 2015 in the Metaphysical Center located in Kamas, Utah.

Also drawing from Schucman's work, devotees seem to emphasize their detachment from their formal organization. Sullivan continued,

Its just kind of a given thing. We're not trying to grow anything or grow an organization. We're not into that. We use this 'seeming' organization as a back drop for healing. End of story. If it rolled up tomorrow, none of us would care. Its not about what it looks like on the surface... for now, this is the way it looks, looks like having centers, publications, a lot of gatherings, a lot of traveling, but it could all disappear tomorrow and we would be just fine.²⁸

Like Schucman, Sullivan perceived *ACIM* not as a product of institutional religion, but as a tool in accomplishing the work.

CONCLUSION

A Course in Miracles influenced an important faction within the New Age movement. What started out as Helen Schucman's internal struggles evolved into a spiritual movement and worldwide acclaimed text. Helen Schuman was an unlikely vessel for transmitting the voice of Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, it is not altogether clear when dissemination became the goal of documentation. What we do know is that her personal experiences laid the foundation for *ACIM*. Her initial channelings of "the Voice" were intimate correspondences regarding her life and interaction with others. Her scribes, most importantly Thetford, also played a role in directing the narrative and later revising the manuscript for greater applicability to a broader readership. In a closer examination of Schucman's earliest recordings, we can see that "the Voice" had multiple tones, which demonstrates processes of scripturalization. And while Schucman could not have predicted its growth, *ACIM* continues to be reinterpreted within new context and among new adherents.

²⁸Interview with Suzanne Sullivan with the author, conducted March 13th, 2015 in the Metaphysical Center located in Kamas, Utah.